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The Easy Chair *by John Fischer*

SOME GUESSES ABOUT THE NEXT KREMLIN CONSPIRACY

If you are a gambling man, you might want to bet a few dollars that Russia will have a major change in government before the year is out. At reasonable odds—say four-to-one, which is the least you ought to get on any guess about the Soviet Union—that could be an interesting speculation.

Such is the advice I've been getting lately from people who make their living by watching the Soviet leaders and trying to figure out what they might do next. Some of my best friends are Kremlinologists, professing their arcane science for the government or universities or, in a few cases, in private practice. Since I have been an amateur Kremlin-watcher myself from time to time, and have on occasion been able to pick up scraps of information for them, in return they sometimes tell me what they are thinking. They seldom agree; but recently most of them have been hinting—with the well-hedged caution which is also characteristic of race-track touts and stock-market analysts—that some time in the fairly near future they expect a shift in the top levels of the Russian oligarchy.

They also are uncommonly close to agreement about the reasons why such an upheaval seems likely. The current ruling clique has made too many blunders; and throughout Russian history whenever a regime piles up an intolerable number of mistakes, it eventually topples. The recent blunders are not the result of stupidity or incompetence. On the contrary, Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin, the co-bosses of the Kremlin, are by all accounts intelligent and experienced politicians. Their mistakes probably were unavoidable, again for historic reasons. Russian governments, whether Czarist or Communist, always have had trouble in estimating what effect their actions might have on the outside world. And they always have had even more difficulty in adjusting to the currents of change, both inside their own country and beyond their borders. As Milovan Djilas, the former Yugoslav Communist leader, recently pointed out, "a revolution cannot change a nation, its tendencies and qualities and traits." Consequently, Djilas suggested, the present regime can best be understood as a "continuation of the Czarist bureaucracy," with all its built-in rigidity and inertia.

Moreover, the Communist society has no provision for an orderly, periodical change in command; and under its one-party system there is no such thing as a legitimate alternative government. So any change has to be accomplished by conspiracy and intrigue, often accompanied by violence. Only a few hours before his overthrow in 1964, Nikita Khrushchev remarked to a French diplomat that "a political leader should never leave power of his own free will." At that very moment his friends and colleagues in the Presidium (earlier known as the Politburo) were conspiring to remove him against his will. He went, literally screaming and cursing, but with a whole skin.

Khrushchev's own climb to power a decade earlier was not so bloodless. He told the story, while he still was at the top of the heap, to a Western diplomat with whom he had become particularly well acquainted. One evening after both of them had put away a good deal of vodka, the diplomat said, "You know, one thing I never understood was how you managed to get rid of Lavrenti Beria. With his absolute control of the secret police, I should have thought he would be invulnerable."

"He should have been," Khrushchev replied, "but he made one silly mistake. Beria came into a conference room one day without his bodyguard. I shot *him*."

Because he is a discreet and honorable man, the diplomat never repeated this story until long after Khrushchev's forced retirement, and so far as I know it has not been previously published. But the fact that he told it at all is an indication of Khrushchev's impulsiveness and overweening self-confidence.

These characteristics were evident enough when I first met Khrushchev just after the end of World War II. He was then boss of the Ukraine and a fairly junior member of the Politburo, the apex committee of the Communist hierarchy. I was a member of a mission overseeing the distribution of United Nations relief supplies in the Ukraine. In his dealings with the mission, Khrushchev showed some engaging traits: an apparent openness and candor, at least as such things are measured in Russia; a sense of humor; a willingness to experiment; an impatient eagerness to get things done. At the same time he was prone to bullying his subordinates, and anyone else when he thought he could get away with it. (The Napoleonic syndrome, common among short men, especially when they come from humble beginnings.) He loved to embark on bold new projects, and then lost interest in them before they got well under way. And he seemed to me appallingly reckless. For example, he arranged a formal banquet—grotesquely formal, with candlelight, three wines, innumerable carafes of vodka and brandy,

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and a footman behind each chair—for the U. N. mission and the senior members of his own staff. Before the end of the dinner he was so drunk that he launched impromptu into an offensively belligerent speech, became incoherent, and finally had to be helped out of the room, glassy-eyed, by two of his military aides.

At the time it seemed improbable to me that such an unstable character would ever become the supreme ruler of the Soviet empire. Obviously I was wrong—as I have been in a good many other calculations about the Russians. But his instability and impulsiveness did lead eventually to his overthrow.

How his downfall was accomplished is a breath-catching story, as full of suspense and Byzantine intrigue as any espionage novel. All of its details probably will never be known, barring some cataclysm which opens up the secret archives of the Kremlin. But the fullest account yet available has recently been published under the title *The Fall of Khrushchev* (Funk & Wagnalls, $4.95) by William Hyland and Richard W. Shryock. It deserves more attention than it has received so far, because of what it tells about the inner workings of Soviet politics—and because it suggests, obliquely, how the next change of regime may come about, and why.

The book probably is a thinly-disguised intelligence document. Its authors are identified only as "longtime students of Soviet affairs" who are "currently employed by the federal government." That smacks of the CIA or one of its companion agencies; if the authors were, say, State Department men, one would expect more explicit information about their rank and credentials. Internal evidence indicates that they are veteran Kremlinologists, thoroughly familiar with material such as obscure Russian publications and the tapes of Soviet broadcasts, which would not be easily available to anyone outside the intelligence establishment. And they write in the standard jargon of the intelligence appreciation, a style unmistakable to anyone who has read or worked on such reports. If this suspicion is correct, it does not reflect on the value of their work. A number of books—the Penkovskiy memoirs in this country, for example, and the Philby story in Russia—have been published with the known encouragement of the respective national intelligence agencies. They are none the less illuminating for all that.

Stalin's death in 1953 was followed by two years of infighting and secret maneuver within the Soviet power structure. Only in 1955 when Khrushchev had Beria, Malenkov, Molotov, Bulganin—did he feel secure enough to embark on a program of his own. It was an ambitious one. He knew that many changes were overdue after the long, frozen night of Stalinist terror, and some of the things he sought were genuinely in the interests of the Russian people. More food, more housing, more consumer goods. Less fear of police terrorism. More flexibility and efficiency in the clumsy, creaking administrative machinery. More freedom—just a little more—for Soviet artists and writers.

But every one of these changes was profoundly disturbing to some entrenched interest in the country's hierarchy. To produce more food and consumer goods, he had to take money away from the armed forces and heavy industry—the Soviet version of the military-industrial complex; the resulting struggle ended in apparent victory only after he fired Marshal Georgi Zhukov, the most famous hero of World War II. Khrushchev's repeated shake-ups of the Party organization and the secret police jarred whole armies of bureaucrats out of their soft jobs and comfortable ways of doing things. His denunciation of Stalinism offended his colleagues in the Presidium, because all of them (including of course Comrade K. himself) had been implicated in Stalin's crimes. They felt even more threatened by his tentative experiments in freeing some parts of the economy and the intellectual community from rigid centralized control. Such heresy was not only ideologically scandalous. It also imperiled the whole structure which gave the Communist elite their power and privileges. They felt much as the conservatives of the Vatican Curia did after Pope John opened the gates of change in the Catholic Church. For if Authority permits a little freedom of thought, of criticism, and of action, where and how can it be checked before it sweeps away Authority itself?

To offset the opposition to his domestic innovations, Khrushchev needed some spectacular triumphs abroad—and no doubt he also craved them for the sake of his own inflamed ego, after his decades of servility under Stalin. The prospects looked good. He assumed—and stated publicly—that Russia's launching of the first Sputnik and intercontinental missiles was shifting the balance of military power in his favor. The Western alliance was in considerable disarray. Colonial empires in Africa and Asia were breaking up, leaving weak successor governments that seemed to offer tempting opportunities for Communist intervention. So in 1958 he launched a [illegible] plays against the West.

By threats, ultimatums, and harassment of the air corridors, he tried to force the NATO allies out of Berlin. He demanded a final peace settlement in Central Europe on his own terms. He grabbed for power bases in the Middle East and the Congo. But each of these offensives failed—all for the same fundamental reason: the West called his bluff. Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy both refused to yield to Khrushchev's threats, and he was not prepared to back them up with armed force.

By 1961 other things were going wrong for him too. Just as the orthodox old-timers had predicted, Khrushchev's moves toward liberalization had set loose forces that were hard to control; in Hungary they seemed to jeopardize the very structure of the Soviet empire, and had to be suppressed by Russian troops. His grandiose schemes for plowing up the Virgin Lands and for planting American corn in the Ukraine were embarrassing failures. For a brief period he tried an impulsive reversal of foreign policy, calling for "peaceful coexistence" with the West; the most notable result was the split with China, since Chairman Mao could not tolerate such craven truckling to the enemy.

Realizing that his critics both in the military and the Party bureaucracy were growing increasingly restive, Khrushchev decided on the biggest gamble yet in hopes of restoring his drooping prestige and authority. This time his miscalculation was double: he was unable to set up a missile base in Cuba before the United States could find out about it; and when it was discovered, the Americans did not acquiesce. Once again he was forced to back down, this time in the most humiliating public confrontation of all.

That did it. His colleagues in the top agencies of the regime were alarmed by the risks he had been taking, and disgusted by their failure. They also were acutely unhappy over a new set of proposals that Khrushchev was advancing—for drastic economic and administrative reforms, for a showdown with China, for opening negotiations with West Germany. It probably was the evening of October 11, 1964 (according to Hyland and Shryock), that two of his associates in the Presidium, Brezhnev and Suslov, decided that The Boss would have to go.

The way in which they recruited other Presidium members into the conspiracy, and went about the delicate business of enlisting military and secret police support is reconstructed by the authors in considerable detail. Fortunately for the

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rebels. Khrushchev was vacationing at the time at his villa in Sochi; if he had been in Moscow, he might well have found out what was happening in time to squelch it. Even in his absence, the conspirators felt they had to move fast, and by Monday, October 12, they had gathered enough strength to call an emergency meeting of the Presidium to vote their absent leader out of his job.

The next day Khrushchev cut short his vacation and flew back to Moscow, probably because one of his few remaining loyal henchmen on the Presidium (Mikoyan?) had tipped him off. He was met at the airport by the chief of the secret police and escorted at once to a Kremlin conference room where the Presidium was again in session. At the head of the table sat Brezhnev, in Khrushchev's accustomed place. He broke the news, brushed aside Khrushchev's belligerent protests, and told him to appear the following morning before the full Central Committee of the Communist party, which would formally ratify his dismissal.

At that final meeting Suslov presented a twenty-nine-point indictment of Khrushchev's blunders. The accused man was permitted a rebuttal, which has been described as rambling, aggressive, and profane—and the Committee then voted to remove him from all his Party positions. But the vote was not unanimous; and when the decision was announced to the public a couple of days later, it was framed in face-saving terms. Khrushchev had asked to be relieved of his duties, the communiqué said, because of "advanced age and poor health."

Something very similar may happen one of these days to one or both of his successors. Brezhnev and Kosygin are far more cautious, and their style of command apparently is less offensive to their somewhat less-than-equal colleagues in the Party hierarchy. But so far they have been no more successful than Khrushchev in solving the gritty, inescapable problems of the Soviet realm.

They have clamped down on the liberals and intellectuals both at home and in their satellite states. The result has been a wave of revulsion throughout the world, even among lifelong Communists in many countries. Moreover, repression has not stopped the muttering—in Czechoslovakia, where the Russian occupation promises to be a prolonged embarrassment, nor in Poland and Romania, nor even among their own disillusioned young people.

Their Arab clients lost the Six Day War with Israel, in spite of Russia's massive contributions of planes and tanks; and now they seem to be sliding toward another, and more dangerous, confrontation in defiance of Soviet cautions. The Chinese not only are as hostile as ever; they also are making alarming (to the Kremlin) noises about a rapprochement with the United States.

To get their faltering economy in order, Brezhnev and Kosygin urgently need to slow down the arms race and divert the money saved into domestic uses. But an understanding with America and Western Europe has proved impossible, so long as Soviet troops are poised in Czechoslovakia and the shooting continues in Vietnam and the Middle East.

Their most pressing question of all is: How do you run a modern, complex, high-technology society under a system of centralized, rigid controls? Brezhnev and Kosygin have found no answer—because, as even their own people are beginning to suspect, there is none. Their industrial managers, and scientists, and local administrators keep saying, with increasingly open insistence, that such a system just won't work. It could perform, after a fashion, during the war and the early period of industrialization, when the Soviet Union had only a few simple goals. Today, however, the demands of its society are more numerous and sophisticated—ranging from space exploration to contemporary women's fashions, salable exports, a new automobile industry, an efficient production of not-quite-so-shoddy consumer goods. Such goals evidently cannot be reached without some dispersal of decision-making and some degree of freedom—in consumer choice, in pricing, in managerial discretion, in scientific inquiry, and in the flow of scarce resources. In sum, an approach to something like a pluralistic society.

That, of course, is the one thing that Brezhnev and Kosygin and their fellow conservatives in the Communist apparatus cannot tolerate, since it would immediately jeopardize their own authority. They seemed doomed, therefore, to increasing conflict with Russia's New Class, as Djilas has called it: the managers and technologists whose role grows steadily more important in every modern industrial state. The consequent tensions and pressures are likely to accumulate quietly below the surface, until something has to give, like an earth slippage along a fault line. Then one or two of the younger members of the hierarchy may again begin to talk guardedly about the necessity of a change in command, and the conspiratorial tactics which might bring it about. . .

All of the people who have talked to me about the possibility of such a palace rebellion are pretty vague about the man, or men, who might next climb to power.

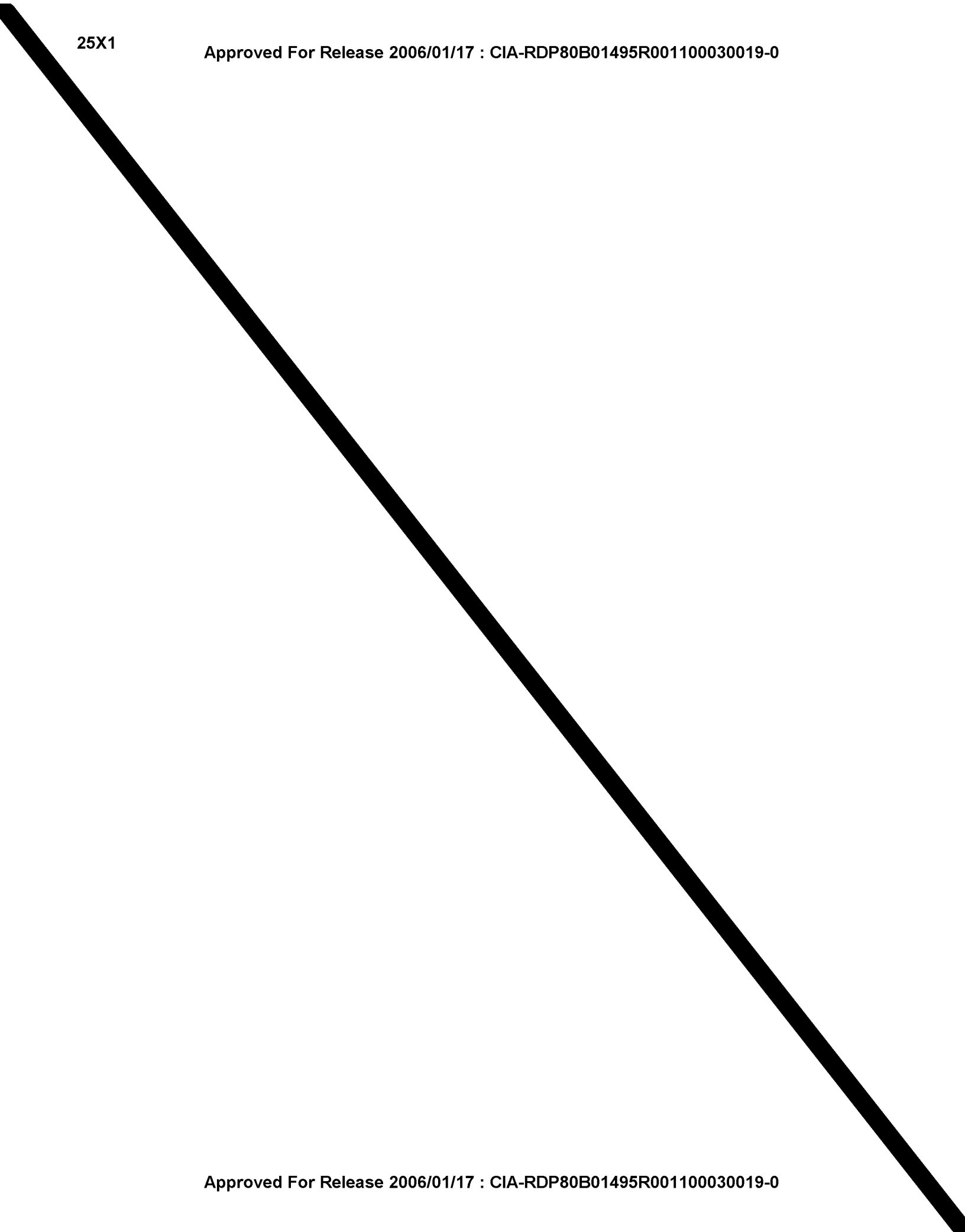
Of the eleven present members of the Presidium, Mikhail Suslov almost certainly can be ruled out. For decades he has been the court theologian, the guardian of the Party's ideological purity. As such, he has had considerable influence, but no real power base in the military, the police, the industrial structure, or the Party machine. (That is why he was not chosen, despite his early role in the anti-Khrushchev cabal, to share power with Brezhnev, who had a strong base in the Party apparatus; instead the second place went to Kosygin, an engineer with a large following among industrial management.) Besides, Suslov is too old, too ill, and too closely associated with the present regime to make a likely heir apparent.

Several Kremlinologists are speculating about the chances of two other Presidium members, Nikolai Podgorny and Peter Shelest. Both are Ukrainians and former protégés of Khrushchev; Podgorny, indeed, may have been the last to desert his old boss in the crucial October 14 meeting of the conspirators. Consequently if Party sentiment begins to turn again toward a more flexible and experimental policy, of the kind Khrushchev attempted so ineptly, one of them might profit from it.

Probably an even better bet is Alexander Shelepin, the bumptious young man of the Kremlin, at least in comparison with the rest of the Soviet gerontocracy. Only fifty years old, he is considered a spokesman for the New Class. And since he has been a trade-union leader, chief of the secret police, and organizer of the Young Communist League, he has excellent connections with several main elements in the power structure.

Other rising young men, such as Dmitri S. Polansky, sometimes are mentioned as possibilities. But at bottom, all this is sheer speculation. After all, even Khrushchev did not know, until the last moment, which of his friends had turned against him. How then could anybody outside the Kremlin hope to guess what shape the next conspiracy will take?

Only three things can be said with some assurance: (1) Such a conspiracy is bound to take form sooner or later, because Russia has no other way of changing administrations. (2) The record of the present regime hardly seems good enough to promise it a long life. (3) Whoever does succeed to the top command will face much the same array of problems and policy dilemmas which Khrushchev and Brezhnev-Kosygin have found so intractable. ☐



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